



ARE OUR INDIANS PAGANS

A Plea to the Contrary and an Appeal
for the Alteration of this
Designation

ARCHIVES
OF
SASKATCHEWAN

By

W. E. H. STOKES

Regina, October 13th, 1906

1915 Amquus St
City.

Presented to the
Legislative Library
of Saskatchewan
by the Author.

W H Stokes

Jan 5, 1911.

ARE OUR INDIANS PAGANS

Perhaps no greater injustice was ever perpetrated by one race of people against another than when the Crees and other Indians of Saskatchewan and Alberta were officially styled "Pagans" by the Dominion Government. After having had a somewhat exceptional chance of enquiring into the obscure subject of Indian religious beliefs, I think it safe to say that the word Pagan is not in any sense applicable to these people, and I think that if the missionaries to them would first apply themselves to the study of what the Crees and the Blackfeet believe, their efforts to Christianise them would be attended with a much greater degree of success than they have achieved hitherto.

But no, with scarcely a single exception the missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant that I have met with approach the Indian they desire to convert thoroughly imbued with the idea that what the so-called Pagan believes in is such a weird, childish tissue of fancies that it is scarce-

ly worthy of the serious attention of any sane man. The Indian's beliefs, as I have been fortunate enough to ascertain, are as sacred, as real to them as ours are to us, and I have yet after fourteen years' experience in this country to meet with the clergyman who had the least idea of what he had to combat in the minds of the Indians, or had ascertained if there was any mutual belief that he and they both held which might be used as a starting point to work from. As a rule it must be admitted that to the missionary, the Indian's creed is Anathema Maranatha.

This may seem to you to be a rather sweeping condemnation of the methods that have been followed by Protestant and Roman Catholic missionaries alike in this country for almost two generations, but when I reflect, upon the enormous sums of money that have been expended, upon the loss of life and health, and upon the real devotion and zeal that have been and are even now being displayed by the clergy and other workers for Christianity, it must make us sad. It must give us pause. To what results can we point? The only answer that has been given to this question is "Give us more time, more money, more workers," but I reply, and hope to prove that I am correct, "Your efforts are misdirected, you have started wrong, and in the meantime the good you have ac-

completed is largely discounted by the tide of civilisation which has undoubtedly undone and is pernicious to the races of Indians which you and I are so anxious to elevate."

In what then do the aboriginals of this country believe? The following is what I found, and it cannot be more than a mere outline on account of the short time in point of years that I have devoted to this, to me, extremely interesting subject. They believe in two deities, the Great and the Small, the Great they call Manitou, which has the power for all good, and the Small, Matchee-Manitou, which has the power for all evil. The possession of power being, to the Indian's mind, the greatest and dearest attribute, he will, naturally apply himself to which ever of these two deities will most further his ends for blessing or cursing, but, whereas he will through another, submit supplications and make great sacrifices through a mediator to the Great Spirit, he will pray, occasionally, to the Small Spirit without any intercessor or formalities or sacrifices. He dare not pray direct to the Great Spirit, but will, recognising his own innate baseness, go through almost anything in order to secure the interest of a mediator or intercessor, who he trusts will have more influence with the Great Spirit, or Manitou, than has his unworthy self.

No
He
is
too
much
wary

It is in the selection of this mediator that the influence of dreams, in all ages and climes a great and powerful agent in their operation on men's minds, comes into force. These mediators must themselves be spirits, and only can reveal themselves to man in dreams, or sometimes they have been known to possess the insane, or mentally afflicted. These latter, however, are often possessed by Matchee-Manitou, and then the evil spirit must be driven out, resulting in the barbarities familiar to us, when a human being is supposed to have a Weh-ta-ko, or Wehtigo. The Indian believes that his own influence with Manitou is as good as any one's, greater than anything's, except a Spirit's. What is then his definition of a Spirit? It is hard to define, but the explanation of the term according to the Cree and Blackfoot is this. It is the invisible essence that formerly animated the body of a human being or animal when living, also it is reflected in and by the shadow cast by inanimate objects when the sun shines. This latter idea appeals to me as a very beautiful and poetic one. We know that all things above ground change and go through their appointed periods of bloom and decay. Nothing in nature is everlasting, the very face of the world itself alters, and that even within a single lifetime, so that when the Indian says "Must there

not be a spirit or soul in inanimate things as well as in these bodies which we deem endowed with life," it is not an extravagant or even, a peculiar thing that he should believe that there is a spirit of a stick, a rock, the prairie grass, or the mountains. He will therefore attach as much importance to the revelations conveyed to him by dreams of these objects as he will to those of his dead fellow creatures, dreams of his dead forefathers or relations, or of any animals or creatures which we call living creatures.

All of these spirits alike were called into being by Manitou and are being recalled into his presence as one by one they die or depart from mortal ken.

Now if the Indian dreams frequently of any object dead, or inanimate that is to say, of any person or animal, or thing casting a shadow, as the case may be, has either some powers for him, or some message for him, or perhaps that the spirit wishes to signify to him that he or it will protect and patronise him by presenting his petitions to Manitou. The spirits themselves have no personal power except only that they are acceptable mediators between the poor Indian and Manitou. Therefore it is to these spirits of which the Indian has frequently dreamed that he will address his prayers, devout supplications and sacrifices in

order that Manitou may be pleased to send to the suppliant power to gratify his wishes, whether they be for success in hunting or in the council tent, or for power to work harm to his enemies or for whatever particular thing it may be that at the time is most earnestly desired. Even though he may be dying the Indian will not even presume to make these prayers or sacrifices more than twice a year, as he fears to intrude so unworthy a being as he feels himself to be upon the notice of his patron spirits more often, and is afraid to be so presumptuous as to have a petition from him presented to the Great God more frequently than this, owing to the reverent fear in which he holds His very idea.

Let us go back for a moment. I found that among the older so-called Pagans, the Lesser Spirit, or Matchee-Manitou, is a being that they would hardly consider seriously, although they believed in his existence firmly. They seemed to attach little importance to the power of the Evil Spirit whom they thought was held strictly in subjection to Manitou, and they apparently only used Matchee-Manitou as a sort of figure-head on which to lay the blame for any misfortune that might overtake them. In fact they would always try to turn aside my inquiries with a laugh, when I asked them about Matchee-Manitou. I need not perhaps re-

fer to him again, as it is only very rarely that an Indian will pray for power to do evil, to this ideal of everything that is bad, called Mât-chee-Manitou, and, as already pointed out, they would never invoke the aid of an intercessor, or make any sacrifice to obtain the power he might have to bestow. But their silence and refusal to answer my questions may, nevertheless, be due to fear.

You will observe that the so-called Pagans are great believers in dreams which they regard as an intimation from some spirit which desires the dreamer to make use of it as intercessor or mediator with the God who is so holy in comparison with the suppliant, that he would otherwise be unapproachable. Therefore, the Indians relate to one another the dreams that visit them, and when it becomes known that a man or women often has the same dream, the others recognise that individual as being under the protection of the spirit of the object or person dreamed of. In this way a large number of the, to us, incomprehensible names so common among them have arisen. They are named after the spirit or thing or person or animal they have dreamed so frequently. This of course only applies to some of their names, which do not descend from father to son.

If by any chance you should hap-

pen to see one of these mis-named Pagan Indians at his devotions (and it is only by chance that you will do so) and should observe that he apparently addresses himself to a tree, a rock or to nothing that is discernible, remember that he is only doing as the Roman Catholics do, that is, asking his patron saint to approach in his behalf the very same Creator that we believe in, but whom the Indian, so poor and vile a creature does he believe himself to be, dare not, and will not directly address. Protestants believe only in one mediator, one intercessor, one ever-living though once dead, sacrifice—Jesus Christ. The Pagan Indian knows nothing of Him and is inclined to regard the story of His incarnation as a flight of the imagination. There is this to be said, that once the postulate is granted, in the matter of the Spirit or immortal essence permeating what we call inanimate things—and this is not a matter that would seem difficult to me—there is nothing in the so-called Pagan's creed which demands the surrender of his reason, or the great and child-like faith which Christians deem necessary. That it is necessary I believe myself, not from any superior knowledge given to me compared to that granted to an Indian, but merely because I recognise in myself so much that is contrary to my reason and yet so much that I

acceptas true, without anything in the way of evidence.

Though the Christian gospel may not appeal to the Indian's reason, the effect or result of Christianity does appeal to him, and in no attractive light either. For what does he find? Civilisation, which must follow Christianity, has been a blight on the Cree, the Blackfoot and on all Indian nations. This is a truism, but the fact remains that civilisation has acted and reacted upon the Indians very much as the introduction of a city sewer would do upon a clear and limpid mountain lake, polluting from underneath, insiduously, the various strata of the Indian's life, affecting first the young, the vain, and the foolish and at last, as the older generations die off, slowly obliterating the last trace of the purity and beauty that formerly was its boast.

It may be said, "Is Christianity to blame for this?" but the Indian does not try to draw the distinction between Christianity and civilisation, he concerns himself only with the effect of either, or both, he cares not which, upon his own and his nation's well-being.

All "old-timers" will bear me out when I say that the Pagan Indian is as honest and God-fearing a man as ever lived, that there is less immorality according to the ideas which prevail among them, I mean less per-

sonal meanness, and almost no petty thievery among the Indians, where they have been fortunate enough to escape the evil influences which the arrival of white men among them has invariably produced. This may seem to some extravagant language, but it is my experience at all events, more particularly among the Mountain Stoneys, who have in a great measure preserved their much-despised Pagan principles of right dealing honesty, general uprightness. They are Methodists now, and as far as I could see they had to make but a slight change after all in their beliefs and no change in their principles. They believe now in God the Trinity and have eliminated the mediation of every spirit but that of Jesus Christ and seem to have found that their old conception of Manitou differs in no important particular with that of their newly-found Father Almighty, the same all-good Power that they have always acknowledged as their master. Not much of change perhaps; who among the living can say? Formerly they were Unitarians, with the very beautiful theory of spiritual intercession added; now they profess with equal sincerity Christianity or Methodism, as you prefer. Whether² this result should be attributed to the Rev. John McDougall, or the inaccessibility of their homes and hunting grounds I cannot say. I have not

had the honor of meeting their missionary and he is therefore not among the failures alluded to above. Honor to whom honor is due. I have met with Mountain Stonies both at Morley and Lac Ste. Anne, and I would trust one in all matters implicitly, relying on his good principles that I should never forget it. *request*

The forms and ceremonies connected with this religion are really few in number, but as they have been so frequently described and even witnessed both by those who understood and by those ignorant of their meaning, perhaps it is scarcely necessary to describe them fully. It will not be in any sense relevant to the question at issue, which is simply this—why are the Indians of the late North-West Territories called "Pagan?"

If I accomplish anything by what I have said which may awaken a train of thought in the minds of my superiors tending towards the removal of the stigma "Pagan," I shall be satisfied. Call the Indians, instead of Pagans, worshippers of God-in-Nature, Jehovah of the Jews and Manitou of the pure-blood Indian resemble each other, and in fact probably mean one and the same conception of God. Let us then style our Indians anything but Pagans.